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ABSTRACT

Flexibility and change have characterized the 3-year history of the English curriculum-enrichment component of the Biomedical Sciences Preparatory Program (BioPrep)--a program that stresses science for rural high school students but includes the importance of writing and communication skills. In the program's first year the curriculum team set out to produce a unified and comprehensive guide based on the students' biology text and providing activities in English, math, and social studies that would complement areas of scientific study. Other first year activities were inservice training for teachers and visits to project schools. In the second year--the students' tenth grade year--the comprehensive, interdisciplinary plan was discontinued and teachers were invited to participate in planning the English curriculum and goals for the year. During the second year the emphasis changed to providing students with a solid foundation in writing. To this end an inservice training session for teachers was held, and a project-wide assessment of student writing ability was undertaken. In the third and current year emphasis remains on student writing. The English curriculum provides direct classroom instruction for BioPrep students and inservice training for their teachers and serves as a laboratory for university level research in rhetoric and composition studies. (JHZ)

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LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM ENRICHMENT
IN RURAL ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

THE EVOLUTION OF A PROCESS: LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM ENRICHMENT IN RURAL ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOLS

This paper first provides a review of the initial goals of the English curriculum component of the BioPrep project. Subsequently, the paper surveys the adaptations, modifications, and changes made in the English curriculum approach progressing through the next two years of the program. Responding to the various social and pedagogical contexts and variables existing in the BioPrep project schools, the English curriculum continues to evolve, having currently reached the point of providing direct classroom instruction to high-school students and regular in-service training for their teachers, in addition to providing a laboratory for university-level research in rhetoric and composition studies.

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THE EVOLUTION OF A PROCESS

In this paper, I will first of all present a brief history of the BioPrep English curriculum-enrichment efforts, beginning with a summary of our initial goals, tactics, and strategies. Then, I will offer a description of the ways our initial structured approach evolved, becoming more flexible to accommodate the oftentimes divergent situations in our project schools. Finally, I will describe our plans for the future of this project, in addition to suggesting ways similar projects might proceed with English curriculum development, based on what we have learned since our project began almost three years ago.

Essentially, we have had to continually appreciate the experimental nature of the BioPrep project. In the area of English, the curriculum approach has reflected an ongoing process of theory-into-practice, of concepts-vs.-reality, during which some of our efforts succeeded and some failed to achieve their designed purpose. From this experience, we have realized the importance for the need to remain flexible enough in our curriculum efforts to respond to the variable social and pedagogical contexts at each of our project schools.

The BioPrep project's overall design stresses science, primarily. But the original grant proposal also stressed the importance of providing programs to improve writing and communication skills. The summer prior to the beginning of the first semester of the project, a special in-service session focusing on the teaching of writing--facilitated by the director of the freshman English program at the university--was provided for the

project teachers. Yet it wasn't until the project had been underway for one semester that research assistants were added to work in the areas of English and social studies. Unlike the science component of our program, the English component does not enjoy as much standardization. Whereas the project's science teachers were specially selected, the English teachers were not. Also, the science classes in all the project schools work with the same text and examinations; the English classes work out of a variety of texts, depending upon which of the three counties they are in. Furthermore, some of the English teachers change from year to year--and some of these teachers are not primarily teachers of English. Granted, the discipline of English is not a quantitative discipline, insofar as science and math are; accordingly, the differences in texts and teachers among the project schools are not as critical as they might be in other subjects. Nonetheless, these differences have presented us with special problems from time to time.

On the other hand, the fact that we are dealing with such a wide range of variables in the area of English curriculum enrichment has resulted in our current flexible approach--which in turn reflects a more realistic position from which to provide our support. Arriving at this position evolved from our initial efforts at providing a standardized structure for the English teachers, resulting in the process of continual experimentation that characterizes our efforts today.

In the beginning, our curriculum team set out to produce a unified and comprehensive activity guide based on the BSCS text, Biological Science: A Molecular Approach. Our guide offered activities that would not only

complement specific areas of scientific study, chapter by chapter, but also contained a series of supplementary activities designed for use in English, math, and social studies classrooms. For example, when the BioPrep students were studying classification in their biology class, they could also work with classification in their English class; we developed essay assignments which asked the students to classify such things as music, sports, or movies in the same manner a biologist would classify living things into divisions of family, genus, and species. Or, when the students studied genetics and heredity, we provided exercises for them dealing with community history and the production of oral-history projects modeled on the Foxfire approach.

During this first year--the BioPrep students' 9th-grade year--we produced our activity guide step-by-step, supplying the English teachers with materials as they were developed. Understandably, not all of these activities were implemented by the English teachers; but when they were, the results were productive.

In preparing the English curriculum this first year, we used the BSCS text as our touchstone, attempting to provide the students with as comprehensive a course of study as possible, uniting as many disciplines as possible. In addition, the English teachers were provided with in-service sessions held at the university. An attempt was made at these sessions to develop an atmosphere of common purpose among the teachers. They were encouraged to share their teaching philosophies and methods and just generally get to know one another, in hopes that this might result in a more standardized English program throughout the project schools. The

Language Arts specialist from the State Department of Education assisted us in our in-service efforts, providing the teachers with practical advice and materials, which served to underscore what we felt to be the value of our program and the range of our capabilities for providing support.

Along with curriculum activities and in-service sessions, the teachers also received articles, papers, and reports which were deemed useful in stressing the importance of some of our curriculum goals. For example, one of our major concerns had to do with the idea that teaching grammar exclusive of allowing students to write was counterproductive. Materials dealing with this issue were mailed or delivered to the English teachers, and during subsequent individual visits to the project schools, we talked about our concerns in this area in addition to keeping ourselves apprised of the BioPreps students' progress.

All in all, the first year of the English component of the BioPrep project was a good one, despite the fact that we got a late start. The English teachers were made aware of our role insofar as support was concerned, and most of the teachers chose to take advantage of our assistance. We learned to maintain a helpful posture, understanding that in order to be best received we had to present our curriculum plans--at least in English--as suggestions rather than requirements. Also, we learned to adjust some of our goals to suit the realities of the project; for example, our plans to incorporate activities dealing with medical ethics were shelved because we felt the students were not quite ready to tackle issues of this nature.

Our curriculum approach for the following year, the students' 10th-grade year, differed markedly from our previous efforts. We chose not to continue the comprehensive, interdisciplinary plan for a number of reasons, the most important of which being the fact that this year the students would be studying chemistry. To compose English activities complementary to those in chemistry, we agreed, would be stretching things a bit too far to be feasible. So, to develop a reasonable curriculum, we first invited the teachers back to the university for a fall in-service session devoted to reaching an agreeable plan amenable to both our objectives and the individual goals of each teacher.

This time, we asked the teachers to participate in planning the curriculum, with assistance again from the Language Arts specialist from the State Department of Education. The result of this in-service was a five-step plan which proposed a series of overall goals for the year. This plan served as a guide which allowed the English teachers to structure their classes according to their individual goals and teaching styles while at the same time accommodating the aims and intentions of the BioPrep project. First on the list was the need to provide the students with a strong writing program. We also decided to stress the discussion and analysis of literature in addition to an attempt at exceeding, whenever possible, the basic requirements for English as expressed in the Alabama Course of Study bulletin for language arts.

During this, the second year of the BioPrep program, an important change of focus evolved in our attempts at improving the English curriculum throughout the project schools. As the year progressed, it became clear

that more of an emphasis needed to be placed on improving the students' demonstrated inadequate writing abilities. Without a solid foundation in writing, we knew the students would not be able to achieve many of the goals, both short- and long-term, that we had established for them. For example, we couldn't expect students to do a very thorough analysis of a piece of literature if their writing skills were deficient.

Articles in current journals and magazines on student writing competency confirmed what we witnessed in the English classrooms of our project schools. The prevailing attitude among researchers seemed to be that students at all levels were doing very little writing and that they were deficient in the reasoning ability and critical-thinking skills that go hand-in-hand with good writing. Since the beginning of the BioPrep project, we had been concerned with writing and had continually stressed to the English teachers, among other things, that grammar shouldn't be taught exclusive of writing, and that students must write in order to learn to write. Admittedly, the thought of grading more essays was not attractive to the teachers; nonetheless, something had to be done to improve the overall quality of the BioPrep students' writing abilities.

The first step we took in attacking the problem came in the form of a special in-service session devoted entirely to student writing. One of the primary themes of this in-service resulted from the fresh prominence the teaching of writing seemed to be receiving across the country, especially in the prevailing notion among educators that students who do not learn to write clearly are not likely to think clearly and thus cannot prepare themselves well for their roles in society. This sentiment seemed

especially pertinent to the BioPrep project, since our ultimate purpose lay not only in preparing these students for college but also in preparing them for a career in health-care fields.

For this in-service devoted to student writing, we invited specialists from the university English department. They gave presentations dealing with some of the current research in composition, in addition to providing practical ideas and materials for use in the classroom. One of the major topics had to do with the notion that, for the most part, English teachers are trained to teach literature and not necessarily writing. The fact that writing instruction should not be solely the domain of the English teacher was stressed. And methods for evaluating student writing were also discussed.

Needless to say, we were quite aware that one in-service alone would not in itself result in full-scale changes. The next step was to complete a project-wide writing assessment. We wanted to assess the writing abilities of all the students in order to determine, first, if the students on the whole were writing up to grade-level, and, second, to determine more accurately how to go about improving the students' writing skills. Ideally, the assessment intended to set the stage for improvement of writing instruction so every BioPrep student achieved a minimum level of competency in writing, and also to establish assurances so each student mastered the basic skills of writing.

In a recent article by William Lutz of the Rutgers University English Department, entitled "What We Know and Don't Know: Needed Research in Writing Assessment," he states that research in writing assessment has not

come very far since Fred Godshalk's work in 1966. In his book, The Measurement of Writing Ability, Godshalk states that "the most efficient predictor of a reliable direct measure of writing ability is one which includes essay questions...in combination with objective questions." Accordingly, we produced just such a writing assessment exam and administered it to all the students in the BioPrep project.

Admittedly, this was not the most scientific of assessments, for a variety of reasons; nonetheless, we took the results seriously--especially since so many of the samples substantiated what we had begun to take for granted--that the BioPrep students were not, on the whole, good writers. It was at this point, upon completing the assessment, that our focus shifted primarily to dealing with the writing problem as we saw it.

One of the ultimate goals of the BioPrep English curriculum plan is to prepare students for the demands of college-level writing assignments. Accordingly, we emphasize to the English teachers the necessity to stress, among other types of writing, writing about literature. It is our desire that the students become more adept at eliciting descriptions, comparisons, and evaluations of meaning and value in works of literature, translating these meanings and values into the world these students know. Unfortunately, as the writing assessment revealed, most of the BioPrep students appeared to be writing below grade-level.

Aside from revealing the overall writing deficiencies of our students, the assessment also made one major point evident: No matter how well or how poorly a student wrote, the majority of them appeared to need to be

challenged. The good writers didn't seem to be extending themselves sufficiently, and the poor writers just seemed to need more practice. Of course, there were exceptions, but this appeared to be an overall condition. And this is where we found ourselves at the close of the second year of the program.

At the beginning of the third year, which began this past September, the English teachers were visited and a comprehensive report was drawn up listing each teacher's objectives. This began yet another change in the development of our English curriculum approach. The emphasis remained on writing, but this time the decision was made to provide support where support was most needed rather than to attempt a project-wide curriculum plan. According to the writing assessment, two schools stood head and shoulders above the rest in terms of competency. This was attributed to the fact that the students in each of these two schools had been with the same teacher since the beginning and that these two teachers were among the finest in the project. Essentially, the students in these top two schools were being challenged much more than their counterparts in other schools, covering more material more thoroughly. Primarily, the students at the two top schools were simply writing more.

Therefore, we decided to work as closely as possible with the teachers and students who could most benefit from our support and intervention. The focus of our efforts had shifted, not only to a more thorough emphasis on writing, but also to a more direct role in a selected group of four schools.

At the beginning of this, the students' 11th-grade year, the English teachers (two of which were new to the project) all planned to stress grammar almost exclusively during the fall semester. We reaffirmed our contention that students learn to write by writing. However, this time we had to contend with the fact that in the 11th grade Alabama students are required to take exit exams. The principals in the four schools we decided to concentrate on during the third year of the program put pressure on the English teachers to prepare their students thoroughly for these exams. Our hands were tied, to some degree, until the exit exams were administered. And needless to say, none of our project students failed.

Since then, we have continued with our individualized curriculum approach. This approach has a number of different aspects. First of all, we developed a correspondence assignment procedure to suit the situation at one high school in which only five BioPrep students take their English class. In this class there are 36 students, a condition unique to this project school - but typical to schools in this area of the state. (At our other project schools, the BioPrep students are not, by and large, in mixed classes with non-BioPrep students; if they are, the BioPrep students significantly outnumber the others.) In order to provide a challenge to these five students, who, understandably, cannot be regularly singled out for special BioPrep tasks, we have developed essay assignments for these students to complete on their own. These students have responded well, and they have expressed a desire for more similar assignments. Currently, we are trying to arrange to meet with these five students once a week in a small group to work further on their reading and writing skills.

At another of our schools where the students are not writing up to par, the principal has arranged for the BioPrep students to meet for an hour twice a week to work exclusively on BioPrep-generated activities--Tuesdays for social studies and Thursdays for English. And we're in the process of establishing similar arrangements at the other two schools we have targeted for direct intervention.

As I mentioned earlier, there has been a tremendous amount of attention given over to composition research in the past few years--a concern we have attempted early on to integrate into our English curriculum planning. Presently, a situation exists which could result in an improvement in the writing abilities of our BioPrep students due to continued concentrated efforts in this area by existing staff members, with the possibility of an even broader base of support from other members of the university community.

At this point in the evolution of our English curriculum development process, I am concentrating on providing direct intervention--a state of affairs which, as I have attempted to show, resulted from our initial efforts at providing a comprehensive curriculum model. In addition to my work with the BioPrep project--as a graduate research assistant--I also teach a course in freshman composition at the university and, as of this semester, I am enrolled in a graduate seminar devoted to current trends in rhetoric and composition. What has evolved from this set of circumstances is a laboratory situation which lends itself well to the experimental nature of the BioPrep project in general--and which also suggests a

direction for further curriculum development, not only for the current BioPrep project but for similar projects which might be established in the future.

The laboratory situation which exists now allows for the continual application of theoretical concepts in a diverse setting, the primary focus of which is the improvement of student writing. Circumstances have evolved to the point where a proving ground of sorts exists, within which new approaches to the teaching of writing can be tested.

As I have stressed, the development and implementation of English curriculum objectives for the BioPrep project has been characterized as a process. What we have learned from this process, among other things, is the necessity to remain flexible; and to some degree, it appears this flexibility has also been our strength. For now it appears we have finally reached the point where our efforts at support can most effectively match the needs of the students and teachers we serve. In addition, our work creating and implementing English curriculum plans could serve as a prototype for an eventual regular working relationship between Alabama high schools and the university, in which graduate students and faculty could participate with high-school teachers and students in a joint effort to deal with what is commonly accepted as a nation-wide writing problem.